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Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. Matt 6 – 33

Of late years there has grown up an idea of the progress of mankind "onward and upward forever" (as the idea is expressed in some modern confessions of faith), as if God had ordained that so it must be; and therefore there could be no question of this continuous advance, without making question also of the power of divine providence to accomplish its ends.

Whatever this belief may come from, and whatever may be its justification, certainly it finds little warrant or support in the teachings of Christ. There, our life is represented as tending upward, or downward, according to the aim and purpose to which men consciously devote their energies; and there is no hint of any divine decree determining in which direction the human mind shall turn. They who seek good with all their heart and soul, shall find it. They who do not strive for something better than they have known, make no progress as the generations pass. Even after the lapse of many ages they remain

when they were at the beginning, or perhaps become more hardened in their shiftless, unprogressive ways.

The business world is a very good field to study for the purpose of determining how much things, left to themselves, tend toward an improved condition; and it may be taken for granted that the moral character of our life, as a whole, is now fairly indicated by the state of the business morals community. As soon as society rises above the semi-barbarous level, industry and commerce become influential factors of its further advance; and ours has become is above everything else a commercial and industrial age, so that the degree of our social & health is to be most accurately estimated in those shops and offices through which the main stream of life now runs.

Political affairs are no doubt of great consequence but, relatively, they do not hold foremost place. The great question is that as to the general soundness and integrity of business life. Are the problems which that involves being worked out toward some satisfactory solution, or are we, getting ourselves involved in difficulties that will lead to ultimate catastrophe? We can surmount

~~will surmount~~ easily enough, the political evils of the hour if the business world does not turn toward evil and corruption. It is to the counting-house and factory that we must look, more than to any or all political offices, to estimate the vigor and strength of forces that to-day make for our moral enlightenment.

Now commerce has by no means always held the place of honor which we of this day accord to it. On the contrary there were long centuries of our own Christian era during which the tradesman was held by the ruling classes of society, in utter contempt. Japan, in former times, worked out quite a wonderful civilization of its own, putting the merchant at the very bottom of the social scale. The thoughtful may regard this view of the office of buying and selling for gain as having been due to mere ignorance and prejudice; but I think every discerning mind must feel that so much ill repute was not purchased without some disserving.

In days when the merchant was looked upon everywhere as a kind of inferior being, he probably had, as a rule, about as much

consideration as he was fairly entitled to. Commerce has climbed out of a condition in which it was generally regarded as a low and mean occupation. How has it risen to be an honorable calling? What is the spring of this moral progress in the business world; and how are the channels of our industry to be kept clean from fatal pollution and disease?

The reason why the tradesman was so despised during all the ages of chivalry, and the special degrading influence that needs to be counteracted in all commercial pursuits are well enough illustrated by the career of the Hebrew people in Western life. The Jew has been hated and feared, not only because he was a Jew; but the common idea that this persecution to which he has been subjected was based exclusively on race feeling, or religious intolerance is rather superficial. No doubt both race hatred and religious bigotry have intensified the feeling against him; but there is a deeper source of this antagonism.

The Jew came into the West with Asiatic habits and standards deeply engrained in his character. His presence in European marts of trade brought into Western life an infusion of Oriental business customs. The warfare between

him and the people of the West even, originally, not so much because he was a Jew, as because he was an Asiatic. For throughout the East, even up till this present time, ordinary commerce is little better than a system of organized duplicity. In all the bazaars of Hindoo and Mohammedan nations the common merchant is past-master of the art of successful imposture. His very trade is to practice deceit upon the innocent and unwary, and in the pursuit of gain he is as cunning and merciless as any beast of prey.

Then on, it is true, great merchants among the Parsees and the Chinese, as honorable and upright and intelligent as any that the world can show. Yet as a whole the Orient is stupid in that notion, about which horse-dealing, with us, has scarcely risen; that commerce is essentially a process of fleecing some other man in a trade. It is looked upon as a kind of warfare in which any means that can be made to succeed, and escape detection, are to be considered sufficiently legitimate.

The Jew at first was made practically an outlaw in Europe, mainly because this was the

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kind of commerce that he practised; and as he rids himself of the slump which his asiatic training put upon him, persecution against him gradually disappears.

But in what he was when he first began to invade the Western world, and in what trade throughout the rest now for the most part is, we can see, well enough a kind of commercial life that has in it no promise of progress whatever. It is impossible for the world to get much better than it is, where its daily business is almost altogether in the hands of petty means and things.

That is the condition out of which commerce has somehow arisen; and always there is in it a certain tendency to revert to this original estate. Some people now think that our business world is very good, and others think it is very bad. But be that as it may, no intelligent person can be blind to the fact that there are strong corrupting agencies at work, which not being held in check, might easily carry us far back toward the lower level of a distant past.

We are at present having an unusually sharp conflict with what has come to be called "communism"; by which we mean an

unrestrained and unscrupulous selfishness in the pursuit of money. Professional and political, as well as commercial life, have become more or less tainted by a spirit which seeks nothing higher than a money reward. It is very suggestive that in our industrial age the name applied to this subservience of life's higher interests in following a private advantage should be "commercialism"; as if everybody recognized the fact that here is the dreadful evil of all business activities; the division which all commercial duty tends to generate and foster, and for which some remedy must be found if the world is to continue in an upward path.

It goes without saying that in the hands of men of character all branches of industry and trade offer as noble a calling as any man can follow. Not only do they contribute immediately to the world's physical well being, but they lead immense possibilities of good with reference to the moral and intellectual welfare of society. But also there can be no doubt that in the hands of men without character every ~~place~~ phase of the world's work is done may become a source of horrible injustice

and black iniquity. The question is, can the business world deliver itself from the disorders which thus arise? Does its own training provide the character capable of meeting and holding such evils in check? Left wholly to themselves would the morals of the market place advance or decline?

These are large questions. To which no complete answer can be given without study of a wide range of facts. There is however one consideration which must go far to convince any unprejudiced mind that it is, to say the least, doubtful how far the business of any nation can sustain itself in the service of high ideals, without outside help. That is in fact that competition always tends to become so deadly as to seem to force upon the average man, now and then, some compromise with his conscience.

There can be no doubt that in contests of every kind, a mere trick, contrived in order to delude and deceive, will often give a distinct advantage; and in so far as business becomes warfare the same thing is true. For a time even the wicked, by means of wicked devices can get the upper hand and can prosper. The business man therefore, finding

that his rivals have stooped somewhat from honorable practices, and have made money by such departure from the best traditions of their calling, is more and their put under an almost unbearable strain of competition, to save them from disaster by following their example.

This is, I am persuaded, a very serious matter. Such competition is not perhaps directly responsible for those crimes and abuses of trust which now and again shatter the business world, yet with by lulling the moral sense of a business community may be thus weakened and benumbed, till out of that portion dictates of honor, come of flagrant and disastrous criminality will spring.

Not all the trusts established in our day, of ~~that~~ which the public makes such loud complaint, were formed with the idea of creating a monopoly of the commodities in which they deal; nor even of making a combination strong enough to levy tribute upon the public purse. To very considerable extent this wide tendency toward the creation of larger, and ever larger combinations of capital and men, is an effort to

escape from the evils and dangers of a ~~without~~ without competition; competition which not only keeps prices down, but which stimulates the growth of enterprise, ~~sometimes~~ sometimes even of unlawful arts and practices, that it hurts any man of conscience and honor to feel himself forced to adopt.

But combination cannot cure the tendency of business life. ~~The~~ The warfare between aggregations of men and interests may become just as deadly and unscrupulous as that between individuals and private concerns. The mere fact that the warfare is waged upon a bigger scale takes away nothing of the demoralizing influence it frequently exerts. Of great corporations it may be said, just as truly as of the small tradesman's affairs, that so far, and only so far, as they are in the hands of just and honest and honorable men, will they be conducted with adequate regard for the public good; ~~and~~ on in a way to maintain the best standards of morality.

The one power that can hold in check the evils of the time is the power of character; and character, of the highest stamp, the business world by itself is not ~~to~~ likely to produce.

In the very nature of the case, and by the study of historic instances and examples, any observer of life should be able to satisfy himself that commercial pursuits, to hold a ~~sure~~ course of uprightness and integrity, and the infusion of a spirit which commerce itself cannot be wholly trusted to foster and maintain.

Character, in this instance means the enthronement of certain ideals in the hearts of men for whose sake anything else is to be accounted loss. It means the recognition of a certain ideal excellence, to achieve which, in whole or in part, is life's supreme endeavor. It means that a man shall go to do it even with some vision of a noble manhood, or some picture of a possible orderly and perfect world, that when the question arises; "Shall I embrace this opportunity to make money, though it is not in strict ~~not in~~ accord with any sense of what is right and best, or shall I do what the highest kind of manhood would do, - what the best interests of society demand, though I thereby sacrifice much possibility of worldly gain?" there cannot be an instant's real hesitation in making that choice, but all over the mind turns

away from the glittering bribe set before it, to follow the higher good at any expense of worldly loss.

We in this part of the world are most happy in being born into a society over which ideal aims have acquired enormous power of control. The men and women of our race who first came to these shores came on no adventurous quest for gold or land, but in obedience to what was, in their sight, a heavenly vision. Whether their dream of a new kind of social and religious order was wisely or foolishly conceived, is not to the point; whether their hopes of a pure church and a noble state were possible or impossible of fulfilment, now matters little.

The great thing is that they had the vision and the hope, and that a dream of perfection had so taken possession of their minds as to lead them to put ease and prosperity and wealth behind them, when they accepted the poverty and hardship of life in an unbroken wilderness. In the very spirit of Christ's command they sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Like Abraham of old they "went forth in faith." This was seen

a better than Abrahamic faith, for in addition to his trust in Divine leadership they held a very definite idea of that promised land of his Spirit which they believed God had prepared for them.

For many Puritan ideas and customs I have myself small sympathy and scant admiration. Moreover being human they had their weaknesses, and coming out of an age of intolerance they bore the stamp of its cruelty on their minds and hearts. But it is impossible to deny to the Puritans who settled New England this measure of reverence: that for the sake of a great ideal they turned their backs on almost everything that makes life precious: on home and kindred, on goodly state and native land; to brave the perils of the mighty deep, and to face the grimmer dangers of life in a savage wilderness.

And it should be impossible, not even now, to see how this act of theirs has impressed itself on the life of that great nation which has arisen where first they blazed their trails through the New England forest. Puritan ideas, like many another system of belief, have "had their day and ceased to be." But Puritan idealism has become the priceless inheritance of a ~~nation~~ nation of idealists.

So strong a moral atmosphere has this tradition of seeking the better way at all costs, and at any hazard made, that a vast amount of alien life, coming into this mental climate, has been swept by it, and has been moulded through its influence into the stuff of which heroes are made.

It is a tradition which has borne splendid fruit in many a professional career. It has made doctors and lawyers and ministers, whose moral stature was little short of the sublime. It created a race of men in trade who well deserved the name of "merchant princes" sometimes applied to them; for they were men not only of great intellectual vigor, capable of handling large concerns; but they were the soul of honor, the living embodyment of Christian gentleness and charity.

In ways which we do not wholly understand the influence of such lives lingers in places where they once walked. It is a great privilege and a solemn responsibility to be born the heir of such a social inheritance. There are places in this country of ours where no such feeling of obligation to work for a better world seems to obtain; where, frankly and undisguisedly, the one object for which men live is to increase their store of worldly

wealth, no matter whether they leave behind them a worse or better state of things than they found upon their entrance to active life. And every such place can be no better than a centre and source of moral disease in the community of which it makes a part. Even the highwaymen are more dangerous to the peace and order of our modern world than were the highwaymen of more primitive times. Those robbers of the past took men's purses, but did no real damage to the souls of their victims. These other robbers of the present day breathe a contagion which corrupts thousands of our youth, and destroys in a multitude of lives the power of every ideal aim.

We live where a better tradition rules, and where such malign influences, though they undoubtedly exist, have by no means obtained the upper hand. It is a fair chance, in our life, by courage and fidelity, to preserve the ascendancy of that type of manhood which seeks an ideal good. To whom much is given of them much is required, and it is a great responsibility resting upon us to maintain that habit of living which puts spiritual honor and integrity higher than any other form of worldly possession. When the tide already runs

this way, it must be our incredible shame if we do not keep open the channels for its cleansing flow.

Now this devotion to the higher ways of living, this faith in the possibility of a better world than has yet come into being, is in itself a very good and great religion. Of many of our best men and women at the present time it may be said that it is all the religion they know; and it is a very narrow and short-sighted ecclesiasticism which treats such faith as if it were a slight or inconsiderable thing.

But however, amid the shifting of currents of belief, faithful minds find themselves unable to profess the creeds generally held by their fellows; and whatever honor may belong to them because of their moral purity and nobility: I wish to suggest that the common religious attitude toward them, as if they somehow came short of the kingdom of heaven, is not without some perplexed and specious reason.

Because in the large way, and on a wide scale, there is only one source out of which idolatry ever has or ever will come, that is to say it comes out of the religion of a people; and they who keep no touch with the religious forces

and activities of their time, have no connection with the deepest and most permanent springs whence ~~the~~ the attachment of the common mind to an ideal arises.

For two reasons humanity in general, whatever may be true of certain exceptional lives, is dependent on its religion, for whatever vision of perfection it cherishes and follows. One reason is that, taking the world together, the struggle against evil is obviously useless and hopeless in the common sight unless ~~it~~ one believes that an infinite power works with man for the better world that is to be. The ~~the~~ kingdom of this world, as an effective and growing power ~~can be little more than~~ in human affairs, can be little more than a foolish dream, except as one sees it to be the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

The other reason which makes religion of such vast importance in the life of this ~~century~~ century. Man is that his own deepest powers of imagination give him little by way of a picture of moral excellence, apart from the image of one of these ~~these~~ great personalities, which all the religion that is worth anything is sure to enthrone in his heart. Every religion under the sun has its heroes or

saints, whose superior virtues fix and hold the aspiring aim of their worshippers. Christianity's peculiar possession, of equal worth with its trust in the providence of God, is the life of Christ; as an embodyment of the heavenly life in mortal form. No considerable portion of mankind will ever live much in an ideal realm without that trust in Divine powers and that attitude of discipleship toward a great exemplar of the Divine path, which religion seems from the common heart.

And therefore no person can clearly perceive what are the dominant forces at work in the shaping of character, without being deeply interested in the religion of the people among whom his lot is cast. It may be his own hard fate to have to save his ~~own~~ soul apart from those aids and influences that a religious fellowship affords. His beliefs may not be sufficiently in accord with any church to permit him, as an honest man to become humbly among its worshippers; or the church may foolishly demand of him a profession of faith which he is unable to make. But at least no man should be an outcast from the religious society of his fellows if he can help it.

To some extent his own salvation is at stake
It requires an unusual mind to face the world's temptations
unaided by those social influences which help to hold
us up; and Even when one can be loyal to his
best ideals, without religious faith and religious
companionship, he stands in some peril from the spiritual
pride which that achievement is almost sure to
engender.

To say, as many do appear to say, "I need
no faith in God or heaven, no shining footprints
of a heavenly Christ going before to show me the way"
may easily become the self righteous boast of the
Pharisee. The human mind, to have rightful place
in the company of those who have helped the
world upward, must think of something more than
its own spotlessness. It must think of the
need and hope of that great struggling, suffering
mass of humanity by which it is surrounded;
of men and women everywhere richly endowed
with blessings that God has made common to us
all, yet everywhere tormented by a hunger they know
not how to appease, and a thirst for something
they cannot yet attain.

There are many ways of doing good

to ones fellow men. But then is one thing without which no uplift whatever counts as a true and permanent gain; and except for which all other advantages will prove in the end hollow and heartless; and that is a religious faith strong enough to assure men that their own existence, and all existence, is something more than beating the air. The one lesson of life apart from which all other wisdom, and all other attainments, crumble at last into mere nothingness is to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

He who weighs this fact, how near to the willful very center of human welfare stands the Christian Church; how unspeakable a calamity would be its degradation or its overthrow; what vast consequences may yet result from its fellowship devoted to the pursuit of spiritual aims.

In a highly sensational age; when multitudes of people rush hither and thither in search of some new excitement; and nothing greatly attracts public attention unless it stands like some kind of flaming portent in the sky; there are yet enough for seeing

faithful souls, steadfastly loyal to what is true and real, to maintain the traditions of a spiritual life which must at last make congruent of the whole race of men; and there is no other shelter within which that life can maintain itself, so surely and easily, as within the hallowed precincts of the Church of Christ.

To that Church let us cling, sure that many careless and wayward feet now wandering away from it, will soon return to its portals, for the sake of the peace and rest and strength which men have always found when they could say, "this is the House of God, and this the gate of heaven."